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## Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape

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only problem with this story is that it never happened. I am sympathetic to authors who occasionally print incorrect information here or there. It happens to everyone, but I worry about accounts such as this for which there is no evidence. Foerstner uses references, not notes but short snippets from the text with a source following it. There is no page reference for these snippets, so readers must search the references section for the text in question. Too often I failed to find the source, as was the case for this story.

Overall, *James Van Allen: The First Eight Billion Miles* is an acceptable biography that will be of interest to many but certainly will not be as useful to specialists in the field as had been anticipated. I had harbored hopes that this would be the seminal work that all would have to refer to in considering this scion of space science, but there is still much more about James Van Allen that eludes us. Perhaps a future biographer will explore more fully his scientific discoveries, his role in space policy, and the contributions he made to solar-terrestrial magnetospherics.

*Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, by Douglas Reichert Powell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xviii, 260 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, references, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer James R. Shortridge is professor of geography at the University of Kansas. His books include *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (2004) and *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989).

*Regionalism* is a word most people use without reflection. It evokes conventional wisdom about a place or the rube-like antithesis of cosmopolitanism. Powell argues for deeper understanding. Whereas other conceptualizations of place (such as home, city, and state) refer to specific sites, he notes that regions always are relational terms. To say that the American West is a frontier culture, for example, is to compare it to the nation as a whole. This means that regions are dynamic entities, products of competing definitions. As such, they can be windows into the complex relationships between people and places, a perspective sorely needed in this dehumanizing time of globalization.

In recent decades, students have learned to leaven their generalizations about American culture with considerations of race, gender, and social class. Powell wants to add region to this list as a way to understand tensions such as local-global, periphery-core, interior-exterior, and domestic-foreign. It is an important argument. Thoroughly grounded views from Iowa farmers or West Virginia miners,

for example, can provide needed counterpoints to the equally narrow (rootless, upper-class) perspective of the cosmopolite. Similarly, participating in local debates over alternative futures for Iowa (or West Virginia or New York City) can provide a relatively responsible path toward social change.

Powell arranges his work into five chapters plus a long introduction and an epilogue. The introduction and first chapter develop the core concept and consider possible approaches to its study. Then come demonstrations of how place-centered social construction (or critical regionalism) might be studied, using as an example the author's hometown of Johnson City, Tennessee. Chapter two is a regional reading of the local built environment, chapter three of films, and chapter four of literature. The final chapter and the epilogue are more personal. They consider the role an activist university could play in the process and include his own attempts at Duke University and his reflections as a professor's child at East Tennessee State University.

I judge this book a partial success. Powell has thought deeply about his subject. He engages the spirit of social theory without falling into its jargon, and intelligently develops the nuances of a complex idea. Comparisons of his view of region with more limiting versions found in county museums and on topographic maps are especially effective. So is his deep reading of a local story about the hanging of a circus elephant.

The author's demonstrations of how southern Appalachia has been imagined are less praiseworthy. Partly this is because he ignores a growing body of relevant literature about material culture and sense of place from anthropologists, folklorists, and geographers. Such work would have strengthened chapter two and suggested other approaches as well. The chapter on literature works reasonably well, stressing how seemingly national texts such as the U.S.A. trilogy of John Dos Passos might be read *through* Appalachia. He contrasts this with two more local works: James Still's *River of Earth* and Jo Carson's *Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet*. I see a loss of focus in the other chapters. Powell's previous tight arguments give way to movie analysis for its own sake in chapter three, where the emphasis is on *Apocalypse Now*, *Deliverance*, *Fargo*, and *Pulp Fiction*. The material there also overlaps with the chapter on literature. Powell's university discussion is mostly polemic.

*Critical Regionalism* is an academician's book, but its core ideas are important to Iowans and anybody else who lives away from centers of national power. Powell has considered his theory well and makes a good case for regional empowerment. Unfortunately, he provides only partial blueprints for how to proceed.